

# **“I can’t believe I just said that”: Using guided reflections with non-Indigenous pre-service teachers in Australia**

---

**Bruce Burnett**

*Queensland University of Technology, Australia*

**Jo Lampert**

*Queensland University of Technology, Australia*

**Karen Crilly**

*Lawnton State School, Queensland Department of Education, Australia*

*This paper explores the use of guided narrative reflection as a strategy used with high-achieving non-Indigenous pre-service teachers in Australia on teaching practicum. We suggest that reflections (and subsequent dialogue) can provide opportunities for non-Indigenous pre-service teachers to re-think their beliefs and actions in ways that may intervene in the teaching that often causes educational disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.*

**Keywords:** *educational disadvantage, non-Indigenous teachers, reflection, teaching practicum.*

According to Australia’s National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP), teachers must be prepared to achieve equitable and appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at all levels of education. Rather than focusing this paper directly on such government policy and the children it is designed to help, we turn our attention to non-Indigenous people who will teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children in the future. We examine education programs for non-Indigenous university students who are training to teach in schools and discuss some ways to prepare these future teachers to change the long-standing pattern of school-based disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students. In particular, this paper examines the value of guided reflection and its capacity to merge theory with practice as non-Indigenous pre-service teachers explore their own cultural standpoint and the problems an ‘unexamined life’ potentially brings to the classroom.

Our research is informed by a selection of data from a specialised teacher education program, now in its fourth year: the Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (ETDS) project. This Australian project was designed to prepare highly academic pre-service teachers to work in schools that have students from disadvantaged or low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. Addressing the oft-stated need to prepare high-quality teachers for low SES schools, the ETDS project selects high-achieving undergraduate Education students to participate in two years of specialised curriculum to prepare them for the schools that need high quality teachers most. Pre-service teachers in this program do all their teaching practicum placements in socio-culturally disadvantaged schools<sup>1</sup>. In 2011, some of this cohort did their practicum teaching in schools with large numbers of Indigenous students and several went on to teach in remote communities upon graduation. This paper tells the pedagogical stories/journeys from two of these pre-service teachers and examines how they built connections between the situations they encountered on practicum and the theories on disadvantage and Indigenous education they learned at university. As dialogue and reflection are integral to the ETDS project, this paper gives voice to the contradictions, consolidations and new understandings that arose for these non-Indigenous pre-service teachers as they taught Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children in (often) unfamiliar classroom settings.

Programs that link broad notions of social inclusion to education are not exclusive to Indigenous or First Nations education. Across North America, Europe and the Asia Pacific, there are numerous similar initiatives. National policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) in the United States and the Australian Gonski Report (2011) and Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (2010), as well as reports from Canada (Levin, 2004) and the UK (Aldridge, Parekh, MacInnes, & Kenway, 2011) attempt, in various ways, to address the explicit connections between ‘economic disadvantage’ and a student’s subsequent educational participation, success, and performance. Although such initiatives have been broadly welcomed, it is important to note that, for the most part, they have had little or unassessed impact on the manner in which teacher education courses equip pre-service teachers with the required graduate attributes to work within the schools targeted by such policies. In Australia, this is particularly the case in terms of low SES schools with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments where students are disadvantaged by the schools themselves. Such concerns are given extra significance when one looks at the fact that teacher graduates within the top quartile (in terms of their academic test scores) are far less likely to accept teaching positions within school settings with which they

---

1 While the term disadvantaged is without question inadequate, the authors of this paper maintain its use. Though the students in schools located in ‘poor’ communities are not necessarily disadvantaged within their own communities, it is the school settings we refer to here. In part, we argue that these schools are disadvantaged because of their teachers or the lack of cultural safety or responsibility within the school community. After much and ongoing debate, we prefer ‘disadvantaged schools’ to ‘challenging’ or ‘complex’ schools. All schools are challenging and complex; not all schools socio-economically disadvantaged.

are unfamiliar and indeed may fear (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). In addition, those high-quality graduates who do accept positions in these schools are retained for relatively short periods.

There is little question that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people are the most disadvantaged group in Australia, and that education, as a whole, is failing to meet their needs (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2007; Banks, 2007; Santoro, Reid, Crawford, & Simpson, 2012). The gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and non-Indigenous educational achievement remains significant. Despite the 'closing the gap' discourse being common in education, only minimal change has taken place with respect to literacy, numeracy, retention, attendance and graduation. We argue in this paper that the problem can be partly addressed at the level of teacher education; however, we also understand that it will never be resolved simply through graduating more teachers. In fact, in Australia urban, regional *and* remote schools with high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students already receive disproportionate numbers of beginning teachers (Connell, 1994; Vickers & Ferfolja, 2006). We suggest that a more productive direction would be to unsettle the common practice of placing beginning 'needy' teachers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In short, this paper addresses two core questions:

- How can teacher education programs better prepare high-quality graduates with the key attributes best suited for complex schools with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments?
- How can these teacher education programs ensure that their outstanding graduates begin their careers and are retained within this most deserving and disadvantaged of schooling sectors?

It seems timely to consider how teacher education programs should be tailored in ways that are both academically challenging and culturally responsive. This paper begins by reviewing a number of programs that have used innovative, yet disparate, methods in an attempt to better prepare graduate teachers for schools with large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohorts of students.

## QUALITY TEACHERS IN CONTEXT

There is a wealth of Australian literature regarding the preparation of teachers to teach Indigenous children and youth. The *What Works Program* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013), *Dare to Lead* (Principals Australia Institute, 2013), *Stronger Smarter Institute* (Queensland University of Technology [QUT], 2012), the *Focus School: Next Steps Initiative* and the *Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP)* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2012) all, to a greater or lesser degree, address the need for better-prepared teachers. Although some research has focused on the importance to teachers of such things as embedding Indigenous perspectives (Craven, Halse, Marsh, Mooney, & Wilson-Miller, 2005; Phillips & Lampert, 2012), other research has examined the specific education

of teachers (Price & Hughes, 2009) and preparing practising teachers and principals to be leaders (Sarra, 2003). University education, nonetheless, remains especially crucial for new teachers working with Indigenous students. A number of recurring themes emerge from current research in this area, such as the lack of university courses that prepare teachers to teach in schools with high numbers of Indigenous students (Price & Hughes, 2009; Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk, & Robinson, 2012) and the problems that occur when teachers approach Indigenous students using a ‘deficit’ model (Whatman & Duncan, 2012). Pre-service teachers claim that their university studies leave them ill prepared to teach literacy and numeracy to Indigenous students (Moyle, 2004). Current research from Canada (den Heyer, 2009), New Zealand (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2009) and Australia (Aveling, 2012; Price & Hughes, 2009) have also revealed a number of recommendations for preparing teachers, including undertaking compulsory university units that are designed to expose underlying prejudices and encourage reflective journal writing prior to undertaking field experiences.

Reflection plays a critical role as a key graduate attribute and it is an important determinant in a pre-service teacher’s ability to successfully undertake field placement. This section weaves into the text narratives from two non-Indigenous ETDS pre-service teachers’ practicum experiences in schools with large cohorts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These types of narratives provide a space in which the teacher as a practitioner can speak their own disparate subjectivity. But reflection alone does not necessarily lead to the ‘radical change’ required from teachers as they engage in cultural interface (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). We suggest it is the dialogue that comes after such reflection that may lead to schools that are less disadvantageous for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Narratives from only two students are included here, but we hope that they will serve as a means of generating, disciplining, dismantling and displaying the pre-service teachers’ voices. These narratives show how it is possible to document the building of connections between the pre-service teachers’ practical experiences and the theories on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education that they covered at university. Narrative reflections also pinpoint moments that can be ruptured; the times when pre-service teachers who engaged well with theory at university may ‘lapse’ or default to less helpful positions when out on practicum. The reflections provide voice/space for the contradictions, consolidations, and new understandings that arose for these pre-service teachers as they taught Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children in unfamiliar classroom and cultural settings.

## **CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY AND TEACHER EDUCATION**

Some of the current literature on pre-service teachers and culturally responsive pedagogy emanates from the United States and focuses on groups such as African American or Hispanic students. There have been a number of successful programs undertaken in the United States that have sought to prepare teachers to work in culturally diverse schools through mentored learning opportunities in the field. This

is evidenced, for example, in the research undertaken by Groulx (2001) in the United States that examined the perceptions of teachers towards teaching in 'minority schools'. Many of the teachers held views of their students that were based in the deficit model, expressing the desire to "help those people". Others displayed "colour-blindness"; that is, the attitude that they did not see colour and that it was irrelevant to their teaching. The study explored teachers' interest in and comfort levels with teaching in schools with high levels of cultural diversity. Teachers also ranked the relative importance of various issues they believed would be 'problems', including students not speaking English as their first language, behaviour management problems, lack of student motivation and lack of parental support. Not unexpectedly, the teachers stated their preferences towards teaching those similar to themselves, including their preferences to work with colleagues with similar cultural and socio-economic background. In other words, unsurprisingly, middle-class teachers prefer to work in schools that are white, middle class and privileged. After working in schools, however, many teachers had changed their views and expressed a desire to work in more diverse schools rather than urban or private schools. It seems that with support, opportunity and experience, teachers can overcome their reticence, but not without a strong community of practice.

In Australia, there is extensive discussion about the need for specialised preparation for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Moyle, 2004), though it seems this may not be enough to support them as they enter the workforce. Ahmed (2006) and Phillips (2011) discuss the resistances non-Indigenous teachers often express towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies in their university courses while Forlin (2006) discusses how many teachers, once employed, do not feel they have the practical skills to differentiate the curriculum or employ appropriate assessment strategies. Many graduates report dissatisfaction with their teacher education preparation, feeling they lack the necessary competencies. This complaint is particularly evident in relation to teacher education courses that only last one or two years (including postgraduate courses); these courses seem too short to attend to the many skills required by quality teachers. This preparation of quality teachers for Indigenous students is especially significant for while many have noted that while improvements have been made over the past 10 years, the educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remain well below those of non-Indigenous students in every category, including literacy and numeracy, school attendance and retention rates (Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), 2003). Forlin (2006) discusses the disparate representation of Indigenous students dropping out of school before the end of their compulsory education, noting that regular school attendance is a critical element in academic success. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students report feeling that teachers treat them unfairly, do not care about them, do not encourage them and do not understand them (Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington, & Richer, 2000). Lack of adequate teacher training and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture compounds this relationship: some teachers have low and negative expectations, default to stereotyping and lack recognition of individual differences. Many, such as Harslett, et al. (2000) have

recommended quality preparation followed by in-service professional development to ensure that schools have structures that maximise opportunities for relationships-based pedagogy and student-centred curriculum. Central to discussions, especially from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints, is the need for non-Indigenous teachers to examine their own cultural privilege.

There are a number of recurring themes emerging from current research. These include the paucity of university courses that are designed to prepare teachers to work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools in ways that are not informed by the deficit model. Many teachers report feeling that their university studies leave them ill-prepared to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students (Craven, et al., 2005). The call for more focus on students is not recent. For instance, 15 years ago, Ryan (1997) discussed teachers’ attitudes towards teaching literacy to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students on completion of a university unit. Ryan advocated then that student teachers should be encouraged to develop awareness of their own preconceptions and prejudices, and be given opportunities to do so at the beginning of teacher education programs.

Yet despite widespread calls for better preparation of teachers, conditions have not dramatically changed. Many years after Ryan’s study, teachers still hold stereotypical ideas about Indigenous students, and largely still act in a ways that are informed by the deficit model (Rohl & Greaves, 2005). Rohl and Greaves discuss how ill-prepared teachers feel to teach in diverse settings. Once again, these authors deplore the gaps in teacher education programs that are supposed to prepare teachers to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students and lament the lack of research in this field. While teacher education can address this preparation on many levels, they advocate intensive teaching clinics as most effective in preparing teachers.

More recently, reports such as that produced by the Australian Education Union (AEU) (Moyle, 2004) call for current debates specifically to address what ‘quality teaching’ means in the context of teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children. In a damning report of teacher education, the AEU still finds that 37.5 per cent of current teachers do not feel their education prepared them for dealing with the needs of their students with fifty per cent of respondents reporting not having completed a mandatory unit in Indigenous Studies during their education (AEU, 2012). Specific references to teacher preparation were, yet again, central to this report and an earlier MCEETYA taskforce on Teacher Quality and Educational leadership (Alegounaris, 2003). This review of current research reveals numerous recommendations for preparing teachers, including compulsory embedding of Indigenous perspectives in teacher education courses (Phillips and Lampert, 2012) and the regular recommendation that teachers examine their underlying prejudices in reflective journal writing prior to undertaking field experiences. Santoro, Reid, and Kamler (2001) recommend that teachers complete more than just a token course in “multicultural education” (where ethnicity is constructed as “other”) and also recognise Indigenous education as a priority.

Within the context of the research findings mentioned above, the ETDS project aims to develop graduate teachers' skills so that they have moved beyond entrenched ideas about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Changing these entrenched ideas requires challenging self-reflection to understand how being non-Indigenous often privileges these new teachers in ways they may take for granted. In other words, they need to consider how they, as teachers, may be a significant part of the 'disadvantage' experienced by students. In this paper, we focus on narrative inquiry as a key aspect of teacher preparation. Like Trotman (2001), we explore the possibility for change presented through reflective journal writing to examine whether reflection and deep engagement with mentors can help teachers to unpack their underlying subjectivities.

## **THE EXCEPTIONAL TEACHERS FOR DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS (ETDS) PROJECT**

We now discuss the ETDS project in more detail. The project attempts to address the significant social issue of educational disadvantage through a new cohort-model that ensures the best suited teachers are equipped with key graduate attributes to allow them to successfully teach (and select employment) within historically hard-to-staff school settings. This section of the paper introduces the ETDS project's use of an objective selection process, targeted field-experience placements, customised curriculum, and active mentoring within key schools. The ETDS project has now prepared three distinct cohorts of high-achieving education students, each selected based on their high Grade Point Average (GPA); a demonstrated commitment to the project's objectives and requirements; and by offering them a firm understanding of the cultural and socio-economic factors that affect student educational outcomes.

The ETDS project has its antecedence in conversations that occurred between the authors as they pondered the question: What happens to the 'best' of our Education graduates? Not only was this question frustratingly difficult to answer, it also appeared that many people within the education sector often had their own anecdotally-based opinions, which ranged from "They all end up getting jobs in elite private (independent) schools" to "None of them last ... they only teach for a year or two and resign". Obstacles to answering this seemingly straightforward question include there being little or no agreement as to what constitutes a 'quality' graduate teacher, together with the fact that accurate destination data for these graduates is extremely difficult to obtain and is only obtained from those graduates who respond to the national survey administered four months after graduation. Our initial conversations occurred within a broader climate of repeated calls for research that explicitly focuses on teacher education programs that better prepared high-quality teacher graduates who specifically express a desire to work in what teachers often think of as disadvantaged schools (Howard & Aleman, 2008; Rice, 2008). We also understood that the current focus on 'quality teaching' makes invisible the specific teacher attributes that might relate to working within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island schools, such as cultural and cross-cultural understandings; the ability to work in and within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island community; and a high level of personal and professional awareness. In other words,

just because someone is an excellent teacher in one environment does not mean they will be in the next (Moyle, 2004). Asking ourselves what happens to the best of our graduates served as a fertile platform for us to begin considering ways in which our own Faculty of Education might do two important things: potentially identify our highest-quality teachers and subsequently channel some of these university graduates into schools that need them most.

The ETDS project emerged in 2009 and was broadly framed around three pivotal issues. The first addressed how to identify a cohort of high-quality teachers. The second sought to ascertain how a specialised curriculum could potentially better prepare this outstanding cohort with the required graduate attributes to successfully teach within complex schools, including Indigenous settings. Lastly, ETDS sought to address how partner relations within key schools could be nurtured to allow the cohort a scaffolded and closely mentored field placement. Now, four years later, the Australian ETDS project has grown into a nationally acclaimed mainstream four-year Bachelor of Education program that offers high-quality teachers engagement with a modified curriculum that, amongst other things, encourages pre-service teachers to explore how their privileged status might be hampering them from being better teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students, and to consider how they might transcend these limitations. In addition, the project allows for carefully selected field placements specifically tailored improving teacher capacity in low socio-economic and longitudinally tracks graduates from the program to determine employment destinations, retention and performance data related to teacher effectiveness.

The ETDS project overtly positions itself in opposition to existing approaches that attempt to address educational disadvantage through what have been described as ‘missionary’ (Labaree, 2010) or deficit (Comber & Kamler, 2004; Flessa, 2007) models. Hattie (2003, p.2) convincingly argues “it is what teachers know, do, and care about which is very powerful in the learning equation”; therefore, ETDS places emphasis on ‘challenge’ and ‘deep representation’, and uses academic excellence as a key/core selection criteria to entry into the program. Hattie’s seminal work demonstrates how teachers account for a 30 per cent variance in achievement outcomes, a point repeatedly stressed in major initiatives targeting improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students, such as the federal program What Works (Price & Hughes, 2009).

ETDS participants are involved in the project during the last two years of their four-year degree. We identify and select each new cohort of about 30 third-year Bachelor of Education Primary and Secondary students out of a total cohort of about 600. Participating students are identified on the basis of their academic achievement over the first and second years of their four-year degree. The 2010 and 2011 cohorts (n=56) were selected based on an outstanding GPA (2010: GPA of 6 or above; 2011: GPA of 5.75 or above). Although academic excellence and content mastery remain central, data has also been collected on the participants’ prior experience with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; their performance in two foundational socio-

cultural units; and the degree to which they demonstrate commitment to the project's objectives and requirements of program. Participants now complete the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschanen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) at key junctures within the program with the expectation that such data sets, when combined, will enable the research to ascertain potential attributes or dispositions (additional to academic excellence) that can help in the selection of subsequent ETDS cohorts.

Selecting participants primarily because of their outstanding academic achievement assumes that each student enters with content mastery of their chosen discipline. All ETDS students take a compulsory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island education unit in their first or second year of study and to enter the ETDS program, they must have done well in this subject. This allows ETDS to focus on the modified curriculum, which targets a sophisticated understanding of poverty and disadvantage. Importantly, this modified curriculum provides a framework for understanding notions of social justice within teacher education (see Grant & Agosto, 2008), and is subsequently revisited through reflective experiences and mentor relations during practicum. Combining university course-work theory with targeted and scaffolded field experience (Grant & Sleeter, 2003) provides ETDS participants with a solid foundation from which to build distinctive sets of graduate attributes structured around the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to successfully negotiate the intricacies of complex schools. Central to the on-campus course-work theory component is a mixture of:

- socio-cultural theory in which a sophisticated understanding of disadvantage and poverty, social class, culture and gender is developed;
- a skills-based approach addressing broader notions of pedagogical expertise (Berliner, 1992) in which issues such as behaviour and classroom management are addressed
- a focus on core skills and content areas of particular concern for bridging the achievement gap, such as literacy and numeracy.

It is important to stress that each of these three areas of theory is later linked to the teacher's field experience placements within collaborating schools, allowing participants to ground course-work theory in the situated realities that teachers working in this sector experience. In addition to developing a crucial knowledge of self and culture (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005), the ETDS 'mix' promotes notions of 'teacher capacity' (Howard and Aleman, 2008) and is informed by Shulman's (1986) framework for professional knowledge (discipline/content knowledge, curriculum knowledge and pedagogical knowledge).

Selection of the placement is critical, and although ETDS participants are involved in a normal course progression in terms of practicum, each field placement occurs within sites, where students and their families attending the school generally have high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, often with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island student cohorts. Initially, each school across urban, regional and remote locations was identified by its IRSED ranking (Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage),

which was obtained from the ABS. However, as a result of recent federal government changes to the manner in which school populations are described, ETDS now uses a school’s ICSEA score (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage), which is a calculation weighted not only towards socio-economic levels, but also comparisons of national literacy and numeracy results. ETDS attempts to cluster pre-service teachers on practicum with other participants in the project and each school typically hosts between two and six ETDS practicum places; this ensures that the participants are supported both by the school and by each other. Data sets obtained from the participants include interviews with the mentor and teachers, journals, practicum reports and feedback from school site coordinators. Interviews and surveys are conducted before and after each practicum. Now, with ETDS in its third year, our early career teachers often act as coaches for the next group of ETDS teachers. This has been especially effective in remote Indigenous schools where our ETDS graduates are now employed.

## **REFLECTION: THE GROUNDING OF THEORY IN FIELD EXPERIENCES**

The literature suggests several factors that determine a teacher’s success in working within a hard-to-staff school. These include (but are clearly not restricted to) the degree of scaffolded exposure provided during their teacher education course, combined with high levels of mentored support during the early stages of their career (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Despite the most obvious avenue for scaffolded exposure being field placement, the literature suggests that the dynamics of practicum, for the most part, occurs outside the control of the university and can be heavily influenced by the manner in which partnerships have been developed between universities and school sites (Zeichner, 2010). Given the central importance of field experience, considerable time during the initial stages of developing ETDS was devoted to interviewing principals and teachers of these schools to work through what dynamics (if any) were different in these settings, and how the project might modify its curriculum to take these into account. Interestingly, data from these initial interviews repeatedly underscored perceptions from the schools about the importance of an appropriate balance between on-campus exposure to targeted theory and the opportunity to apply this knowledge in ‘real world’ practicum experiences. Data collected over ETDS field placements during 2010 and 2011 (n=98), however, indicates this process is far from straightforward. In particular, the ability of participants to make connections between university-based content and the personal, pedagogical, policy and practical dimensions in complex schools varies considerably. Although such variance may be influenced by the type of content (in particular, the extent to which students feel the content is relevant to their teaching), data from pre-practicum and post-practicum interviews of ETDS participants points to the crucial significance of timely feedback and reflection.

Few would argue with the importance of field placement in school classrooms as a central component in how teacher education develops and fine-tunes graduate attributes such as cultural competence. Indeed, the idea of connecting the theoretical learning

of the academy to practical, hands-on experience is certainly not new to theories of learning and teaching; we see in the early work of Dewey (1938) a strong argument for the increased linking of theory and practice, with both elements considered necessary for effective learning. Interestingly, the inclusion of ‘real’ classroom experiences within the field of teacher education predates Dewey, and can be traced back to the early 1900s, when “the general form of teacher training [in Australia] was remarkably uniform: a combination of on-campus study … and a school-based practice which was jointly supervised by school and training institution staff” (Vick, 2006, p.183). However, in the research addressing pre-service teachers who do practicum placements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools, relatively little has been written about practicum classrooms as places where ideas are solidified, contested, and revised. In Australia, Hart, Whatman, McLaughlin & Sharma-Brymer, (2012) examine the tensions that exist within schools where Aboriginal and Torres Strait knowledges are subsumed both by Western pedagogies and curriculum.

It is possible, of course, to argue that there is “no such thing as an unreflective teacher” (Zeichner, 1996, p.207), however, the ETDS project has increasingly promoted the importance of reflection because it allows the pre-service teacher to touch on their own personal struggles over what Lather (1991) first called the politics of knowing and being known. The narrative excerpts within this section have been included as a means of showing how it is possible to represent a particular form of culturally responsive reflection. It is also hoped that this differentiated text serves as a provocation and a means for pre-service teachers (and readers) to co-engage in and encompass a tangible means of generating, disciplining, dismantling, and displaying difference-as-data.

Although many might argue that the ETDS project’s overt linking of theory to practice is logical and makes common sense, the principle issues for ETDS repeatedly return to two questions:

- How can we best strike an appropriate balance between the depth of exposure to on-campus theoretical content and the practical application of this knowledge in the field?
- How can we facilitate the reflective skills of the pre-service teachers involved in the project?

The importance of reflection as a key graduate attribute is an interesting point of departure in exploring notions of teacher development, and spans a broader discourse that critiques the relationship between teacher education and practicum (see for example Zeichner, 2010). Sitting at one end of a continuum are the vocal supporters of educational theory, who strongly defend academic rigour; at the other end are those who openly support the belief that the most ‘valuable’ knowledge that teachers gain in such complex educational sites is the hands-on experience obtained within the classroom. This dualism becomes even more complex in the case of ETDS because it must operate within often-competing cultural and socio-economic pressures. Interestingly, this theory/practice dichotomy is relatively widespread across non-

education disciplines: advocates of theory appear to resist institution-wide ‘on-the-job’ learning models (or Work Integrated Learning) and overtly support notions that “the major source of individual career development is the learning that occurs through experience in work activities, roles, and contexts” (Morrison and Hock, 1986, p. 242).

## **REFLECTING ON THE REFLECTIONS: TWO EXAMPLES FROM PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS ON PRACTICUM PLACEMENT**

### **Reflection 1**

In the first set of email reflections, a pre-service Secondary teacher on her third practicum placement began by expressing her uncertainty around her students’ reluctance to display or hand in their homework. Suzie was on practicum in a remote Aboriginal community. Though there had been some discussion around the idea of ‘shaming’ in her coursework<sup>2</sup>, it was impossible for Suzie, as a non-Indigenous woman, to have a nuanced understanding. Her default position, despite what she had discussed in coursework, was to think about how she could change students. Because she had the opportunity to reflect in a safe and private forum as things occurred, Suzie could step back from her initial plan, which was to persuade her students that their way was wrong, and reconsider instead her own assumptions and teaching practice. Coinciding with this email discussion we suggested Suzie read up on issues related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait pedagogies and knowledges and consider changing her own thinking rather than the thinking of her Aboriginal students.

### **Reflections Suzie reported during a fourth-year practicum and internship in Cape York (Far North Queensland) 2011**

[The school] has 50% Indigenous students. While I have generally built a good rapport with most of my Indigenous students, and know that they are capable of doing the work and want to be engaged, it has proven difficult for me to actually get many of the students, often the girls, to participate in activities or show me their work; 99% of the time students will scrunch up the work they have spent all lesson doing and throw it in the bin so as to avoid anyone seeing it. Likewise, I have witnessed kids teasing and pressuring each other not to voluntarily answer teacher questions or do the work.

When I asked other teachers about such behaviour, they stated it’s the “shame factor”—where kids tease each other if they seem to be trying to succeed in class and kids are too embarrassed to show me their work because they are too ashamed/embarrassed that they have done the work incorrectly or their handwriting is not neat enough, et cetera. [The Principal] even stated that sometimes the Indigenous kids call others that try at school “coconuts: black on the outside but white on the inside”. To me, this name inadvertently suggests that white people are smart while a true Indigenous person is dumb, which makes the name all the more damaging as kids hold this naturalised opinion of themselves and their culture (but maybe my interpretation is incorrect?) … Other heads of department have stated that when it comes to engaging many of the Indigenous kids in school

---

2 For explanations of ‘shame’, see Grace and Trudgett (2012).

it's not just about the student, but the whole community; in order to break this shaming, et cetera.

At the moment, I am just asking myself the question of how do I compete with this attitude? I watch my class and am frustrated and somewhat upset because they are so smart and have so much potential but what can I do, as one teacher, to get past these issues? To be honest, I had never really come across this "shame" factor in education other than some Indigenous kids may respond better to one-on-one praise, et cetera.

### **ETDS Project Leader's response to Suzie**

Thanks for this—let's keep having the discussion ... That term 'coconuts' is sometimes used. Maybe it's not exactly about white being smart and black being dumb. It's more an accusation of rejecting one's own culture (sucking up to the white teacher, trying to look better than your own people). Does that make sense? You're right; the 'shame' thing is something you can consider. I suggest taking the 'shame' into account—rather than trying to 'break the shaming' (which is a community thing, and which you may not really understand).<sup>3</sup> Do you think it might be better for you to be sensitive to it? To accept it as real rather than trying to change it? In other words, if excessive praise is going to embarrass your students, avoid it. Making students 'go public' with their work may provoke shame, so I would avoid doing it. You could be casual in how you look at their work and what you say about it, especially when others are around. Appreciate their hard work but don't go overboard—if you collect it, just take it (without saying much). It's not that they won't be proud of it, but they may not want your public attention. For instance, you might consider not asking students to do presentations or public speaking—you can underplay your gushing rewards. Does this make sense to you?

I guess what I'm saying is you DON'T need to compete or change community values—the attitude sits within the culture (much may be more collective than competitive) and you just need to be ok with that ...we strongly suggest you process this with someone from the community. Is there an Aboriginal person on staff or in the community you could talk with? You'll have to make the approach, and you'll have to listen carefully. Build some relationships before you make any changes.

### **Response from Suzie**

Food for thought. In a way, thinking back to what we talked about in tutorials, I sort of can't believe I said that. Wow – it's pretty easy to fall back on assumptions, isn't it!

Suzie's initial email illustrated a number of positions which she needed to reconsider: i) Suzie fell back on assumptions and she forgot she had some theory she needed to revisit; ii) Suzie felt she was being understanding, but forgot she might not have the knowledge or capacity to make judgements about her students; iii) Suzie was ready to jump into solutions that tried to change (or impose ways on) her students. The most significant outcome of this exchange was that Suzie was encouraged to keep interrogating her own assumptions.

---

3 For explanations of 'shame', see Grace and Trudgett (2012).

## Reflection 2

This second excerpt is from Sharon’s reflective journal written while on her third-year practicum in a small primary school with the highest percentage of Aboriginal students outside rural or remote settings in Queensland. Sharon received very high grades in her Indigenous Education unit, which had required her to research and write a rationale and teaching episode that embedded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island perspectives, but her lesson plan had been written for non-Indigenous children. She expresses here her dismay when the lesson, presented now to Aboriginal students, did not go as planned. Before examining her own pedagogical and curriculum decisions, she defaulted to a position of blame and deficit. We suggested she reframe her interpretation of their disengagement.

What I noticed was that many Indigenous students were unprepared to try. One student in particular would answer “I don’t know” before looking at the question.

During a lesson teaching similes and metaphors in ballads, I ended the lesson by reading “Ballad of The Totem” by Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Coupled with my commitment to embedding Indigenous perspectives into my lessons, I felt it was imperative to include an Aboriginal poet in the studies of Australian ballads and poetry, particularly for the Aboriginal students in the class. At the end of the reading, I was surprised that there was no response from the students. My learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island studies together with teaching literature had led me to expect that Aboriginal students would be engaged by this inclusion and that it might possibly spark interest from non-Indigenous students.

### ETDS Project Leader’s response to Sharon

That was a good start, Sharon, and better to give something a try than to do nothing! I’m sorry you were disappointed. Give some thought to why you felt this way. What disappoints you and what can you do differently? Try not to forget that Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (and you as their teacher) are all affected by the same historically entrenched school-based ideas about what knowledge matters. You’re right. Embedding Indigenous perspectives is absolutely the right thing to do, so keep it up, but try not to be discouraged when your Indigenous students don’t behave as you wish they would. That might be problematic, too. What do you think?

Sharon’s disappointment needed to be reconsidered on a number of grounds: i) Sharon was quick to assume that her students did not care (or even that she cared more than they did). This needed to be reframed; ii) Sharon was ready too soon to give up on the important task of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island perspectives; and most significantly, iii) Sharon’s idea that her students were ‘unprepared to try’ needed interrogation. While Sharon did many things right in her classroom teaching, these reflections allowed her to think about how she could change what she was doing ‘wrong’. Questioning allowed for further dialogue, which continued throughout her practicum placement.

Despite both Suzie and Sharon being part of the ETDS program and having met all criteria, they were not ‘perfect’. Indeed, one could claim that teachers are never

‘perfect’. Non-Indigenous pre-service teachers are encouraged to engage in a safe community of practice that allows them to receive critical feedback, regularly and continuously. We believe this may help them become, as teachers, less likely to disadvantage students in their classrooms.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the relationship between theory and practice clearly provides a solid conceptual base for practicum; however, the ETDS experience has shown the process to be complex. At the most basic level, practicum experiences are crucial for teachers. Targeted practicum placements enable them to gain insight into the diverse workings of ‘real’ classrooms, which are “typically haphazard and unplanned, and difficult or impossible for the learner and those facilitating learning to control” (Boud & Walker, 1990, p.61). Indeed, student feedback from university graduation or exit surveys consistently include comments such “they learned little from their university courses, but a great deal from their field experience” (Rosaen & Florio-Ruane, 2008, p.711). The value of reflection becomes evident as pre-service teachers regain control over their learning experience and, as shown in the narratives, ground their contemplations in tangible experiences and events, thus gaining new meaning and insights. Reflection, therefore, constitutes a critical attribute for graduating teachers and allows those working in schools with high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students the ability to derive fresh understandings of culturally responsive pedagogy. Reflection thus serves as a means for middle-class, non-Indigenous pre-service teachers to re-theorise their teaching of Indigenous students. We argue, ultimately, that it is not only the merging of theory and practice that makes a difference, but that the moments of slippage provide opportunities for non-Indigenous pre-service teachers to re-think, re-consider and re-learn in ways that may address rather than cause educational disadvantage.

## REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2006). Doing diversity work in higher education in Australia. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 38, 745–768.

Aldridge, H., Parekh, A., MacInnes, T. and Kenway, P. (2011). *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion 2011* [Online] <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/monitoring-poverty-2011> [1997, August 4]

Alegounaris, T. (2003). *Progress Report: MCEETYA Taskforce on Teacher Quality and Educational Leadership in Report of a National Forum on Teacher Standards, Quality and professionalism*. Canberra: Australian College of Educators and Department of Science, Education and Training.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2007). *ABS Directions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statistics* (catalogue no. 4700.00). [Online] <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mf/4700.0?OpenDocument> [1997, July 3]

Australian Education Union (AEU). (2012). *AEU Beginning Teacher Survey Media Information: Key National Results*. [Online] <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/Btsurveyres.pdf> [1997, August 1]

Aveling, N. (2012) ‘Don’t talk about what you don’t know’: on (not) conducting research with/in Indigenous contexts. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(2), 1–12.

Banks, G. (2007, June). *Overcoming Disadvantage in Australia*. Paper presented at the Second OECD World Forum on Statistics, Knowledge and Policy, ‘Measuring and Fostering the Progress of Societies’, Istanbul, Turkey.

Berliner, D. C. (1992). Telling the stories of educational psychology. *Educational Psychologist*, 27(2), 143–161.

Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Cavanagh, T. and Teddy, L. (2009). Te Kotahitanga: Addressing educational disparities facing Maaori students in New Zealand. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(5), 734–42.

Boud, D. and Walker, D. (1990). Making the most of experience. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 12 (2), 61–80.

Cochran-Smith, M. and Zeichner, K. M. (2005). *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA panel on research and teacher education*. Washington, DC: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Comber, B. and Kamler, B. (2004). Turn-around pedagogies: Improving the education of at-risk students. *Improving Schools*, 8(2), 121–131.

Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). *What works: The work program*. [Online] <http://www.whatworks.edu.au/> [2013, February 6]

Connell, R. W. (1994). Poverty and education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64(2), 125–150.

Craven, R., Halse, C., Marsh, H., Mooney, J. and Wilson-Miller, J. (2005). *Teaching the teachers mandatory Aboriginal Studies: Volume II: Case studies of exemplary practice in pre-service teacher education*. [Online] [http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher\\_education/publications\\_resources/profiles/teaching\\_teachers\\_volume\\_2.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/profiles/teaching_teachers_volume_2.htm) [1997, August 1]

Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). Teacher education and the American future. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1–2), 35–47.

Darling-Hammond, L. and Bransford, J. (2005). *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do*. Indianapolis, IN: Jossey-Bass.

den Heyer, K. (2009). Sticky points: Teacher educators re-examine their practice in light of a new Alberta Social Studies program and its inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives. *Teaching Education*, 21(4), 343–55.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2012). *Indigenous Schooling: Focus School Next Steps Initiative*. [Online] <http://deewr.gov.au/focus-school-next-steps-initiative> [1997, August 4]

Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). (2003). *National report to Parliament on Indigenous education and training*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Collier Books.

Flessa, J. J. (2007). *Poverty and education: Towards effective action: A review of the literature*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Forlin, C. (2006). Inclusive education in Australia ten years after Salamanca. *European Journal of Psychology of Education - EJPE (Instituto Superior De Psicología Aplicada)*, 21(3), 265–277.

Gonski, D. (2011, December). *Review of funding for schooling: Final Report*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Commonwealth of Australia.

Grace, R. and Trudgett, M. (2012). It's not rocket science: The perspectives of Indigenous early childhood workers on supporting the engagement of Indigenous families in early childhood settings. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 37(2), 10–18.

Grant, C. A. and Agosto, V. (2008). Teacher capacity and social justice in teacher education. In M. Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser & D. J. McIntyre (Eds). *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring questions in changing contexts*. New York: Routledge.

Grant, C. A. and Sleeter, C. E. (2003). *Making choices for multicultural education: Five approaches to race, class and gender* (4th ed.). New York: Wiley.

Groulx, J. (2001). Changing pre-service teacher perceptions of minority schools. *Urban Education*, 36 (1), 60–92. doi: 10.1177/0042085901361005

Harslett, M., Harrison, B., Godfrey, J., Partington, G. and Richer, K. (2000). Teacher perceptions of the characteristics of effective teachers of Aboriginal middle school students. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 25 (2), 4.

Hart, V., Whatman, S., McLaughlin, J. and Sharma-Brymer, V. (2012). Pre-service teachers' pedagogical relationships and experiences of embedding Indigenous Australian knowledge in teaching practicum. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 1–21.

Hattie, J. (2003, December). *Teachers make a difference. What is the research evidence?* Paper presented at the Joint New Zealand Association for Research in Education and Australian Association for Research in Education conference, Auckland.

Howard, T. C. and Aleman, G. R. (2008). Teacher capacity for diverse learners: What do teachers need to know? In M. Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser & D. J. McIntyre (Eds). *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring questions in changing contexts*. New York: Routledge.

Labaree, D. (2010). Teach for America and teacher ed: Heads they win, tails we lose. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(48), 48–55.

Lather, P. (1991). Deconstructing/deconstructive inquiry: The politics of knowing and being known. *Educational Theory*, 41(2), 153–173.

Levin, B. (2004). *Poverty and inner-city education, policy research initiative, Government of Canada*. [Online] [http://www.horizons.gc.ca/doclib/HOR\\_v7n2\\_200712\\_e.pdf](http://www.horizons.gc.ca/doclib/HOR_v7n2_200712_e.pdf) [1997, August 4]

Moreton-Robinson, A., Singh, D., Kolopenuk, J. and Robinson, A. (2012). *Learning the lessons? Pre-Service teacher preparation for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*. Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology.

Morrison, R. F. and Hock, R. R. (1986). Career building: Learning from cumulative work experience. In D. T. Hall & Associates (Eds). *Career development in organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Moyle, D. (2004). *Quality educators produce quality outcomes: Some thoughts on what this means in the context of teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia's public education system*. Southbank, Victoria: Australian Education Union.

Phillips, J. (2011) *Resisting contradictions: non-Indigenous pre-service teacher responses to critical Indigenous studies*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology.

Phillips, J. and Lampert, J. (Eds) (2012). *Ways of knowing, Ways of being: Introductory studies in Indigenous education*. Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson.

Price, K. and Hughes, P. (2009). Stepping Up: What works in teacher education. Canberra: National Curriculum Services and the Australian Curriculum Studies Association.

Principals Australia Institute. (2013). *Dare To Lead*. [Online] <http://www.daretolead.edu.au> [2013, February 6]

Queensland University of Technology (QUT). (2012). *Welcome to the Stronger Smarter Institute*. [Online] <http://www.strongersmarter.qut.edu.au> [2013, February 6]

Rice, S. (2008). Getting good teachers into challenging schools. *Curriculum Leadership*, 6(14), 1–3.

Rohl, M. and Greaves, D. (2005). How are pre-service teachers in Australia being prepared for teaching literacy and numeracy to a diverse range of students? *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 10(1), 3–8.

Rosaen, C. and Florio-Ruane, S. (2008). Experience, metaphor, and culture. In M. Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser & D. J. McIntyre (Eds). *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring questions in changing contexts*. New York: Routledge.

Ryan, J. (1997). Another country: non-Aboriginal tertiary students’ perceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 25(1), 18–22.

Santoro, N., Reid, J., Crawford, L. and Simpson, L. (2012). Teaching Indigenous teachers: valuing diverse perspectives. In T. Basit & S. Tomlinson (Eds). *Social Inclusion and Higher Education*. Bristol, UK: The Policy Press.

Santoro, N., Reid, J. and Kamler, B. (2001). Teachers talking difference: Teacher education and the poetics of anti-racism. *Teaching education*, 12 (2), 191–212.

Sarra, C. (2003). *Young and black and deadly: Strategies for improving outcomes for Indigenous students*. Deakin West, ACT: Australian College of Education.

Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15, 4–14.

Triponcy, P. (2004). *Indigenous education - Everybody’s business: Implications for teacher education*. Brisbane: Board of Teacher Registration.

Trotman, J. T. (2001). Making the personal professional: pre-service teacher education and personal histories. *Teachers & Teaching*, 7(2), 157–171.

Tschannen-Moran, M. and Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2001). Teacher efficacy: Capturing an elusive construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 783–805.

Vick, M. (2006). It’s a difficult matter: Historical perspectives on the enduring problem of the practicum in teacher preparation. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 34 (2), 181–198.

Vickers, M. and Ferfolja, T. (2006). The Classmates teacher education initiative. *Curriculum Leadership*, 4 (28) [Online]. [http://www.curriculum.edu.au/leader/the\\_classmates\\_teacher\\_education\\_initiative\\_at\\_uws15816.html?issueID=10414](http://www.curriculum.edu.au/leader/the_classmates_teacher_education_initiative_at_uws15816.html?issueID=10414). [2013, Feb 2].

Whatman, S. and Duncan, P. (2012). Learning from the past, in policy and practice. In J. Phillips & J. Lampert (Eds). *Ways of knowing, ways of being: Introductory studies in Indigenous education* (pp. 114 – 140). Frenchs Forest: Pearson.

Yunkaporta, T. and McGinty, S. (2009). Reclaiming Aboriginal knowledge at the cultural interface. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 36 (2), 55–72.

Zeichner, K. (1996). Teachers as reflective practitioners and the democratization of school reform. In K. Zeichner, S. Melnick and M. L. Gomez (Eds). *Currents of reform in pre-service teacher education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Zeichner, K. (2010). Rethinking the connections between campus courses and field experiences in college-and university-based teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education: The Journal of Policy, Practice, and Research in Teacher Education*, 61 (1–2), 89–99.

**Dr Bruce Burnett** is currently a Senior Lecturer at Queensland University of Technology. Bruce has a primary educational background and has worked in both Australia and Asia in a range of school and university settings with particular interest in the low SES schooling sector and the impact of ethnicity and technology on schooling/higher education. As part of the broader More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI), Bruce co-led a national research project involving all Australian faculties of education into the retention and graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students in initial teacher education programs. [b.burnett@qut.edu.au](mailto:b.burnett@qut.edu.au)

**Dr Jo Lampert** is currently a Senior Lecturer at Queensland University of Technology. Jo has a secondary educational background and has worked in Canada and Australia over an extended period in the fields of Indigenous education and in providing innovative learning and teaching related to social inclusion and equity. As part of the broader More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI), Jo co-led a national research project involving all Australian faculties of education into the retention and graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students in initial teacher education programs. [j.lampert@qut.edu.au](mailto:j.lampert@qut.edu.au)

**Karen Crilly** has recently graduated with First Class Honours and is now employed as a primary teacher in a low SES Brisbane primary school. Karen was part of the Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Settings project, which provides high achieving pre-service teachers with the theoretical foundations, combined with practical exposure to successfully undertake employment in the most disadvantaged school settings. [kxcri2@eq.edu.au](mailto:kxcri2@eq.edu.au)